
IN THE KITCHEN

BY RANDY HARBER

WITH VIRGINIA WILLIS

When it comes to developing a refined sense about good food, a sweltering-hot peach orchard in the middle of south Georgia's Macon County might not seem like the ideal location to start. But for Virginia Willis—cookbook author and editor, television food show producer, cooking teacher, recipe developer and food consultant—there are few places better.

“There is not a place much hotter than a peach orchard in Macon County in the summertime,” she says, remembering her growing-up years near Montezuma. “The heat, the gnats, the peach fuzz ... but, oh, the taste of those peaches.”

Sitting at the sun-washed dining room table in her home in Atlanta's Kirkwood neighborhood and listening to Virginia reminisce about her childhood, it isn't difficult to understand why she developed a lifelong passion for food.

“When I was growing up, I was a food snob without knowing it,” she laughs. “My grandmother and my mother loved to cook. My grandfather always had a garden. He planted by the *Farmers' Almanac*. He didn't use pesticides. It wasn't anything organic; he just didn't. But he planted marigolds near his tomato vines because he knew they would keep away the insects.”

“The only jelly I ever had was my grandmother's. She had her own scuppernongs and she made jelly. I can remember the first time I had Welch's grape jelly. I didn't like it. I grew up eating all the foods that we would now spend a fortune to be able to get.”

Memories for Virginia, who was classically trained in French techniques at the La Varenne cooking school in Burgundy, have remained important. Consider, for example, her current project, a new cookbook entitled *Bon Appétit, Y'all: Three Generations of Southern Cooking* that will be published in 2008 by Ten Speed Press.

“There will be recipes from my grandmother, who slaughtered hogs and made her own sausage,” says Virginia. “There will



be recipes from my mother, who watched Julia Child and always loved to cook. Then there will be my recipes, which take ideas and skills from both of them and match them to French technique and what I like to call the world influence.”

Applying the lessons she learned from her parents and grandparents to today's busy families and cooks, Virginia believes the secret to good cooking is top-quality local ingredients and a dash of plain old common sense. In short, her goal with the book mirrors the goal she has for almost every project she does: getting people more involved with their food in a very practical way. “What I want to have are recipes that people can actually use—recipes that emphasize top-quality local ingredients and straightforward techniques.”

Virginia believes there are plenty of good reasons to visit your local green market, to buy organic and to try new recipes with new techniques. “I get a real joy in knowing where my food comes from. Plus, it is important to support your friends and neighbors, and to support the local economy.”

But all those ideas, she asserts, take a back seat to the best reason of all for buying local, in season ingredients and preparing them well: “They just taste better.”

The number of people who love food, who are willing to go to the trouble to find local growers and who will pay the price for organic collards, grass-fed beef and Berkshire hogs is growing but still remains a small segment of the population. “Chefs and real food aficionados will. There have never been as many true food lovers as there are now, but we are still on the edge. It's growing but it's still the fringe.”

Yet, she notes, people in almost every segment of society are more conscious and more interested in food than they used to be. Whether it's the influence of the Food Network, an interest in not eating so many processed foods, or an interest in just being healthy, Americans know more about food than they ever have.

Photograph by Mark Kempf, Art Director, Whole Foods Market

"Not everyone has access [to good ingredients] or the resources to purchase them," she says, "but that doesn't mean you can't do something. Go to the State Farmers' Market in Forest Park," she advises. "That produce may not be organic, but when the peas and butterbeans are in season, they are really good. I just love fresh butterbeans." Plus, she adds, even national chains such as Publix and Kroger have more organic foods—both fresh produce and prepared foods—than they have ever had before.

Virginia is even somewhat accepting of the "semi-homemade" movement in which cooks use some store-bought ingredients as shortcuts to preparing meals. "Not everyone has the time, but at least they think they are cooking."

On the upside, says Virginia, is the proliferation of personal chefs. If both parents are working and don't have time to cook, then a personal chef can be a big help, she believes, because the family will get good meals. And, those meals will create new food memories for the next generation.

Virginia has helped produce more than 1,000 television cooking shows for people like Martha Stewart, *Home Plate* Chef Marvin Woods and Natalie Dupree. She says the explosion of cooking shows on television has no doubt increased both the interest and the knowledge of food in America. Food television at its best, she says, entertains and educates. However, while she likes the fact people are more interested in food, she warns that a lot of food television isn't grounded in reality. As she has written, "Herbs are miraculously chopped, lettuces are always clean and 20-pound turkeys cook during 2-minute commercial breaks. Watch carefully and you will see that there is no real cooking going on in front of the camera. It's all an illusion."

While what was on the Food Network last night may be the talk around the water cooler, "People don't necessarily cook from what they saw on television." Perhaps the people who attract most of her attention are the ones who sign up for cooking classes.

"They are already committed, they want to learn and they are open to trying new things. What I want to do is teach recipes that people can and will actually prepare with quality ingredients and clean, simple techniques," she says. "It's not too difficult to make a dish with a fairly limited amount of knowledge. Home-cooked food that is fresh is going to taste better. And once you understand technique, you don't need a recipe."

When it comes to your food, she suggests, whether in your kitchen, at the grocery store or in the world at large, ask yourself whether something just seems wrong. "Who came up with the idea that cows should eat feed made from cows?" she asks, referring to the use of animal parts in feed that contributed to the spread of mad cow disease. Shouldn't something that so obviously violates common sense suggest it is a real mistake?

When it comes to cooking, the same sort of common sense applies, Virginia believes, all the way down to following a recipe.

"Look for the visual clues. A good recipe will always have them. If the recipe says bake 15 minutes or until brown, don't go

by your watch—look for the dish to brown."

Plus, "Taste the food." That's something a lot of people—especially cooking students—fail to do. "I end up asking students, 'What, you never tasted it? How can you expect to serve something like that. It just doesn't make sense.'"

And as for buying quality ingredients, she believes it is worth emphasizing quality even if it costs a little more. "I'll buy the best ingredients, but will also buy cheaper generic plastic storage bags. It's about making choices."

In the past, she concedes, she has paid what some people would think is a lot of money for fine restaurant meal. "It's my priority. I will always do that, for the food and the experience. But that's why I drive a 10-year-old truck. I'm making a choice."

Eating well, says Virginia, is nothing short of "delightful—and people are starting to see that." That approach should include being aware of your food—who produces it and how is it grown, learning techniques to prepare it and enjoying your time with family and friends at the table. She also suggests having a spirit of adventure. Should you find yourself driving through Macon County on a hot summer afternoon, it makes sense to stop and find a peach.

"There is nothing," says Virginia, "like a Macon County peach." 🍑

The South's First Vodka
Get the Glow
Put some South in Your Mouth

Rated 89 points by The Beverage Tasting Institute
Outscored Finlandia, Ketel One, Absolut and Fris

Time for my
Firefly

VODKA
www.fireflyvodka.com

Distributed by Savannah Distributing Company, Inc.
Made With Wadmalaw Island Muscadine